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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: BURMA DOMINATES ASEAN-EU MINISTERIAL DISCUSSIONS
IN CAMBODIA

11. (SBU) Summary: Cambodia hosted the 17th ASEAN-EU Ministerial meeting held in Phnom Penh May 27) 28, in which a strong statement was issued calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). Although a wide range of issues were discussed, to include climate change, infectious diseases, terrorism and human trafficking, ASSK and Burmese human rights violations monopolized news conferences, informal meetings, and even formal discussions during the two day meeting. Burma's Deputy Foreign Minister addressed critics and spoke out for the first time on ASSK's trial. Prime Minister Hun Sen, who spoke at the opening ceremony, steered clear of the controversy. However, by carefully worded statements to the press as well as the issuance of a joint ASEAN-EU statement, Cambodia and other ASEAN countries have taken what appears to be a tougher stance against their rogue neighbor. End Summary.

Mounting Pressure

12. (SBU) Twenty-seven European and ten Southeast Asian foreign ministers gathered together in Phnom Penh this week for the 17th ASEAN-EU Ministerial. The ministerial was intended to enhance cooperation between ASEAN and the EU in areas such as trade, transnational crime, health and the environment. However, the atmosphere was described by foreign diplomats as exceptionally tense due to the looming question of ASSK's future, which has served to highlight the long history of human rights abuses by the Burmese government. Although peaceful overall, local news sources reported approximately 100 demonstrators gathered outside the Burmese embassy in Phnom Penh May 27 to demand the release of ASSK and the end of repression in Burma, urging ASEAN leaders to expel Burma from the regional alliance.

13. (SBU) In conversations with Poloff, EU diplomats called the discussions on Burma, which began with a strong statement by the UK, as "quite hard." The UK and other EU ministers' use of "Burma" and refusal to refer to it as "Myanmar" provoked repeated objections by the Burmese Deputy Foreign Minister Maung Myint. For the first time since ASSK's arrest, Maung Myint reacted to mounting international pressure by speaking at length on the topic. He stated that his country does not accept pressure and interference from abroad and went on to accuse the junta's critics of threatening "Myanmar's sovereignty," stating that ASSK's trial "is an internal legal issue, and it is not a human rights issue."

ASEAN Reaction

14. (SBU) Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong told local reporters that it was the EU, not ASEAN members, who insisted on focusing on Burma. He nevertheless expressed his hope that Burma would move ahead in the democratization process.

Cambodian Foreign Ministry spokesman Koy Kuong previously stated that "the stand of our government is that it hopes Mrs. Suu Kyi will be found innocent of these accusations and that she will not receive any additional punishment, because she has been punished already." Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya said he respected Burma's insistence on non-interference. According to a Western diplomat at the meeting, Singaporean delegate Zainul Abidin Rasheed stated that "EU is a union of values) but ASEAN is not. Instead, diversity is, if not encouraged, at least agreed." The Singaporean delegate later stated that ASEAN prefers engagement as opposed to sanctions and isolation when dealing with Burma. However, nine ASEAN ministers stood alongside their EU counterparts to urge Burma to free all political prisoners including ASSK at the end of the ministerial. In a discussion with Poloff, opposition Sam Rainsy Party MP Son Chhay praised ASEAN for the stance it took on Burma, calling the ASEAN-EU statement "strong and clear."

Objection

15. (SBU) A nine-page joint statement was released at the close of the meeting which called on the Burmese government to conduct the multi-party general election in 2010 in a free and fair manner. It also called for the early release of those under detention and the lifting of restrictions on political parties. Western diplomats stated that Burma rejected portions of the statement and "adamantly refused any text related to the EU envoy Mr. Fassino whatsoever." Burmese officials demanded their objections, which were added as a footnote to the final declaration, be officially recorded.

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16. (SBU) Comment: Cambodia sees itself as a potential bridge to Burma, should ASEAN ever be tapped to play a more central role in Burma's reform and democratization. Until then, the RGC will go along with joint ASEAN statements calling for the Burmese junta to free prisoners and hold open elections. End Comment.
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